Mandaeism

Demographics

- There are an estimated 60,000-100,000 Mandaeans worldwide.
- The traditional Mandaean homeland is southern Iraq/southwest Iran. Since the invasion of Iraq, most Mandaeans live in the diaspora, with few remaining in their homeland.
- The language of Mandaeism is Mandaic, a dialect of Aramaic.

Origins

- One scholarly view is that Mandaeism originated in the Jordan Valley, as the only surviving remnant of Gnosticism, and migrated to modern-day Iraq/Iran in the early Christian era (2nd-3rd century).
- An alternative view is that Mandaeans originated in the fifth century Sassanid era, based upon the preceding Nasoraean tradition.
    - Mandaic being a throughly Mesopotamian dialect of Aramaic with no Palestinian influences and genetic studies on Mandaeans also support a local origin of the religion.
    - Sassanid Iraq was a hub of new religious movements after the infrastructure of previously existing paganism was dismantled.
- The Haran Gawaita mentions that Anush Bar Danqa presented information about their religion to Muslim authorities during the initial Islamic conquest, centuries after the early Mandaean copyist Zazay d-Gawazta.
    - From this dating, Zazay was supposed to have lived around 272, and represented the religion in a developed state.
        - However, given that the text refers to Anush visiting Baghdad, a city not founded until the eighth century, this is a flawed assumption.
- The earliest Arabic source unambiguously referring to Mandaeans was by the poet Ru'ba (d. 762) who made a reference to Ptahil in a poem.
    - After this, 'Fitahl' entered Arabic literature as a term for an ancient person, although the origin was obscured.
- The earliest outsider account of Mandaeism was by Syriac Christian Theodore Bar Konay (c. 792), who linked the sect with Kentaeans, a now extinct Gnostic group, and placed their origin in the fifth century.
- Manda is a Mandaic word meaning "Knowledge". In other words, a "Mandaean" is a "Knower".
    - Muslim authorities recognized them as Sabians

Beliefs

- Mandaeans believe in one eternal God, referred to as Hayyi ("the Living One"), from which all things emanate.
- Laufa is connection to the World of Light, and the central goal of a Mandaean's life, achieved through rituals (particularly baptism) and inner enlightenment.
- Mandaean theology is dualistic: creation is divided into two opposing forces.
- Mandaeism is highly focused on purity, with conversions not being allowed in order to maintain the purity of the lineage from Adam to current Mandaeans.
- World of Light: The realm from which Tibil and the World of Darkness emanated. It contains countless beings and is the destination of a righteous Mandaean.
    - Mshunia Kushta: Where the perfect, cosmic counterparts of earthly beings reside. Analogous to Plato's realm of forms.
    - Uthras: Messengers of light who endlessly praise God and practiced the Mandaean religion even before humanity.
        - Yushamin (Second Life): Emanation created by Hayyi, father of Abatur.
        - Abatur (Third Life): Name translates to "father of the Uthras".
        - Ptahil (Fourth Life): Fulfills a role similar to the demiurge, is viewed as the creator of the material (with the help of Ruha) and in a somewhat malicious light.
        - Manda d-Hayyi: Mandaeans reject the idea of a human Messiah, instead Manda d-Hayyi brings manda to earth.
        - Hibil Ziwa: Conquers the World of Darkness.
- Tibil: The earthly realm. Several Great Teachers were sent to renew the religion.
    - Great Teachers
        - Adam: First complete man, baptized by Hibel Ziwa and received Manda d-Hayyi (Enlightenment of Life). His sons Shitil and Hibil and grandson Anush are also respected.
        - Miriai: Important figure in the Mandaean Book of John, convert from Judaism to Mandaeism and eventual Mandaean priest.
        - John the Baptist: The most significant Teacher for Mandaeans, and their last prophet. They believe to descend from his disciples.
    - Other Figures
        - Abraham is criticized in Mandaeism for circumcision, which Mandaeans consider mutilation.
        - Jesus is viewed as an apostate from Mandaeism who distorted John's teachings.
- World of Darkness: Underworld, unenlightened souls undergo punishment for purification, although they will

eventually be saved. Various beings inhabit this realm.
    - Ruha: Queen of the world of darkness, associated with uncleanliness. Some texts hint at her conflicted nature and possibility of her redemption.
    - Ur: Ruha's son, who she bore the planets and constellations with.
    - 7 Planets: Shamish/Sun (identified with Adonai), Libat/Venus, Nbu/Mercury, Sin/Moon, Kiwan/Saturn, Bil/Jupiter, Nirig/Mars
    - 12 Constellations: Daula/Aquarius, Nina/Pisces, 'mbra/Aries, Taurus/Taurus, Silmia/Gemini, Sartana/Cancer, Aria/Leo, Šumbulta/Virgo, Qaina/Libra, Arqba/Scorpio, Hitia/Sagittarius, Gadia/Capricorn

Practices

- Baptism (Masbuta)
    - Not merely an initiation like in other religions, but rather an ongoing ritual, and in fact the core practice of Mandaeism
    - Water connects a Mandaean with the Forces of Light and spiritually heals them to aid in enlightenment
- Prayers
    - Mandaeans pray three times a day to regenerate light and empower forces of Worlds of Light
    - Preferable to pray in the Mandi/temple or on riverbank
    - Face north when praying
- Masiqta:
    - Ritual done on a dead Mandaean so their soul can successfully reach the World of Light.
- Priesthood
    - Priests undergo lengthy initiations, and are responsible for performing rituals and guiding the community
    - Female priests do not exist today but existed centuries ago very rarely
    - There are also Nasoraeans who possess deep inner knowledge of Mandaean texts and mysteries
        - They are overwhelmingly from the higher ranks of priests but not exclusively
- Drabša
    - The symbol of Mandaeism: white silk draped onto a T-shaped cross crowned with leaf held together by thread on a ring.
        - Represents five Perfect principles: True Light, True Life, True Love, True Purity, True Peace
    - Considered a channel of the presence of the Worlds of Light in the earthly realm
- Festivals
    - Dihba Rba/Great Feast: Mandaean New Year.
        - Purification to prepare for ascension to the Worlds of Light, which requires seclusion (36 hours indoors, representing the 360 days of the Mandaean calendar).
        - The angelic forces move from water to the Worlds of Light and the Forces of Darkness become more aggressive, so staying inside the house (representative of the womb) protects Mandaeans during this period.
        - After the period of seclusion, celebration commences.
    - Dihba Hanina/Little Feast: One day feast that celebrates the rising up of Hibel Ziwa to the Worlds of Light and his baptism after his journey to the Worlds of Darkness to rebalance the universe.
        - Mandaeans gather in the Mandi and pray/baptize as well as feast.
    - Parwanaiia/Days of Light: Five sacred days of 'pre-emanation' of the Worlds of Light, celebrating aspects of Divinity before any Creation.
        - They are not counted in the Mandaean calendar.
        - Extensive prayer and other worship, time is believed to almost stand still.
        - No Darkness during this time.
    - Dihba d-Daima/Feast of Cosmic Baptism of Light: One-day feast that celebrates renewal of initiation into Mandaeism.
        - Important for continuation on the path of Laura.
        - Children are baptized for the first time.
- Rasta: White clothing that symbolizes the five principles, all rituals are performed in Rasta.
- Mandaean places of worship are called mandi, used for baptism, prayer, marriage, funerals, and celebrations
- Mandaeans often worked as gold/silversmiths and jewelers.
- Taboos
    - Mandaeans do not circumcise and are not supposed to cut their hair
    - Mandaeism forbids alcohol
    - Meat-eating is viewed ambivalently, with red meat avoided and a vegetarian diet being eaten on some days
    - Unlike some other sects, Mandaeans do not encourage celibacy, and marriage/family life is encouraged
    - Mandaeism forbids carrying arms and violence even in self-defense, it is strictly pacifistic.

Texts

- Ginza Rba (Great Treasure):
    - Chief holy book, also called The Great Book or The Book of Adam.

    - Divided into Right Ginza (deals with all aspects of life) and Left Ginza (mostly deals with death/journey of soul).
    - Considered the first words of God that was revealed to cosmic Adam and Eve.
    - Is looked after in special ways, only devout baptized people can touch it and they put it in a special box.
    - Final compilation was after Islamic conquest, however some passages are much older.
- Drašia d-Yahia (Book of John):
    - Contains teachings of John the Baptist as well as other great teachers.
    - Compiled shortly after Islamic conquest.
- Qulasta (Canonical Prayer Book):
    - Contains the prayers used in baptism and other ceremonies.
    - Final compilation was after Islamic conquest, however some passages are much older.
- Haran Gawaita (Scroll of Great Revelation):
    - Recounts history of Mandaeans starting in Jerusalem.
    - Post-dates Islamic conquests.
- There are other sacred scrolls used by priests.